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ABSTRACT

The Center for Alternative Teaching Strategies (CATS) is a teaching center funded under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title IV-C, for the elementary and secondary staff of the Oak Park, Michigan, school district; preservice education students from local universities frequently participate, as well. The project was developed to help teachers experience strategies for interdisciplinary teaching in the arts and the humanities. Throughout the year, presenters offer teachers a series of thematic workshops, which deal with a wide range of topics; these have included environmental studies, values clarification, creative problem solving, dance/movement activities, and popular culture. A typical workshop offers a general overview, an introduction of teaching strategies, demonstration work with students, a question and discussion period, and presentation of in-depth approaches that stress application of the strategies to different disciplines. Supportive classroom services involve the provision of resources and materials for the topics presented, and supportive classroom visits from the center's staff. CATS is perceived as a highly successful program that has developed and sustained a climate for change and that has introduced a wide variety of alternative interdisciplinary teaching strategies. (GW)

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Title IV-C - ESEA - CATS

# EUREKA! CATS REALLY WORKS: A MODEL FOR A PRE-SERVICE, INSERVICE TEACHER CENTER

Three years ago, when I became director of the CATS program in the Oak Park, Michigan School District, I had little more than a strong, blinding faith that the program would function successfully. How successful was the big question mark. CATS, (Center for Alternative Teaching Strategies), is a Title IV-C, ESEA, funded project which was conceived philosophically on the concept that the techniques of arts and humanities are media for inter-disciplinary teaching. With the foundation of process as product and the importance of affective learning, what began as a voluntary series of workshops for the district's fourth through seventh grade teachers has developed into an exciting teaching center for the K-12 staff with frequent participants from surrounding districts and pre-service education students from local universities.[1]

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[1] 91 visitors representing 15 school districts and 5 universities and colleges have visited workshops to date.

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The program's effectiveness capitalizes on a number of current beliefs concerning learning and inservice which Vincent R. Rogers summerizes succinctly:

> Teachers need to express--to feel--to write--to dance--to move--to create--in nonthreatening unpressured situations. Teachers need to rid themselves of the idea that "I cannot do therefore I teach." Good teaching is doing in a hundred different ways.[2]

Not only must teachers be cognizant of alternative teaching strategies, they have to experience them in secure situations where their own failures are just as important as their successes. Too often teacher's classroom failures reenforce sterile lesson execution because there are few arenas where teachers can attempt different methodologies with impunity.

My own classroom was a crucible, and fortunately, I was a glutton for punishment. I remember the first time I tried to teach prepositions to seventh grade students. I knew what a preposition was, at least I thought I did, but trying to define an apparently simple concept, did not transfer to the students in the class. I hemmed and hawed and finally bluffed my way out of the predicament by assigning exercises at the end of the chapter and admonishing the class, "if you don't understand the lesson, read the explanation on page 70 and we'll go over your homework tomorrow." I was saved by the bell.

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[2] "Why Teachers Centers in the U.S.?" Educational Leadership 33 (March 1976), p. 412.

The next day, armed with more concise preparation and a brief conference with my department head, I charged into class and taught the kids everything they wanted to know about prepositions.

What I did that day was different from what I had previously done, i.e., have the students read the preposition list and explain to them that "the prepositional phrase showed the relationship of a noun to another word in the sentence." This time I went around the room and had class members move physically in relationship to their chairs. Thus, Sam could say he was standing "by his chair," Judy, "in front of her chair," Jean, "behind her chair." This game, which I subsequently identified as an alternative teaching strategy, proved successful. Dance, broadly defined here as movement, was used to illuminate a language concept. Students could understand "chair" as "the name of an object or noun" and they personalized their own relationship and that of the preposition to it.

On a different level, it was a legitimate way of allowing junior high students an opportunity of getting out of their seats. Those of you who have taught middle or junior high schools know what I mean. The energy that kids in this age group generate is astounding, and few teachers of these students escape school in the afternoon without experiencing crawling sensations with simultaneous total fatigue.

Years later, the importance of physicalizing concepts in learning with cognitive aspects became an important basis for the CATS project. The "hands-on" and "learn by doing" approach to learning is not new, but a deliberate structuring of arts experiences as means to teach other disciplines has only gained momentum in the United States since the 1960's. While humanities programs seem fairly common in many school districts, the Arts in Education curriculum is sparse by comparison. Indeed, a usual response to the latter concept is, "Oh, yes, we have art and music departments in our district." I have no argument with art and music programs, however, I reaffirm the theory that art, music, and all the humanities are indigenous to a total curriculum and offer exciting possibilities for teaching beyond the end results of performance goals.

It is interesting that in Plato's "Ion" we discover,

> ...not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine. Had he learned by rules of art, he would have known how to speak not of one theme only, but of all...[3]

This Platonic framework has been the basic philosophy of our CATS program. Voluntary participation for the inservice has been a key factor. Inservice is defined here as a staff developmental program operating during regular school hours

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[3] The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Great Books of the Western World, 7 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) p. 144.

with teacher released time. Throughout the year, predetermined presenters, chosen by the project director and staff, offer a series of thematic workshops to teachers. Each workshop is conducted three or four times to different groups of teachers. Since workshop topics are not necessarily sequential, although topically they may be and are often interrelated, preservice students as well as other visitors may experience a sense of completion with the day's strategies. Teachers, who are more involved through patterned attendance, seem more open and accepting to the various approaches of the project's goals of developing critical thinking, open inquiry, problem solving, and values clarification.

An overview of the total program activities reveals a cornucopia of varied delights. Not the least of pleasures was and is the dynamic and vital presentations of each workshop conductor. Let's face it, the cardinal sin of any teacher is to bore his or her student. And how many of us are guilty of this transgression? By choosing presenters whose teaching styles we wanted teachers to emulate, we could subtly define behavior modeling. In plain words, we wanted teachers to be interesting, involved, and attempt alternative techniques. We knew we couldn't achieve this through an entire day of dry lecture regardless of name, rank or subject area. In reviewing

the curricula vitae of our university presenter personnel we chose a rich selection of quality. People such as Ann Zirulnik, Dr. Grace Kachaturoff, Dr. William Hoth, and Ed Jacomo are national authorities in their disciplines, while Dr. William Alexander, Douglass Campbell, Joyce Frank, and Pat Mardney have established local as well as state followings. One interesting facet of the entire program is that although each presentation was an entity unto itself, there was an overall design. Presenters themselves met with project staff at least several days prior to each school year. Consultants discussed relationships of topics, and this interrelatedness of idea and authority gave the year's program a particular cohesiveness. Together, our consultants purchased a total concept.

In three years, the gamut of workshop subject areas ranged from environmental studies to values clarification. However, it is important to remember that each presentation incorporated art and humanities strategies for alternative teaching approaches. Through process, presenters structured workshops on each other's disciplines. Specifically, brainstorming and developing thinking techniques offered in the Creative Problem Solving session were just as applicable in learning to frame one's own simulation game. In our Pop Culture sessions, literary genres were approached through an exploration of comic strips. Newspapers units used

the comics for codifying students' (and teachers') values. Repeatedly, the importance of our presentations has been not only in the specific knowledge presented, but in the applicability of the process to many disciplines. It is amusing that in a recent annual report, one major State Department of Education comment has been that the program is too diverse. Diverse in offerings, yes; yet, can we segment the organization patterns of biology from art, developmental logic and sequential patterns in math from those in English, the scientific study of molecular patterns from the choreography of dance or music, or more importantly, can we continue to look at education as a series of independent disciplines with few, if any, interlocking and supporting relationships?

One major understanding which emerged from the CATS project is the almost common skeletel process forming kinships with each discipline. The strange paradox is that the knowledge fleshing the process skeleton separates rather than binds disciplines to each other. Approaches in elementary school segment learning into subjects and units. High school after high school reveals the zealous guarding of discipline domain. The English department teaches English; the Social Studies department continues to control its various borders. We must eliminate these barriers if we are to have more cohesive educational systems.

Teacher attitudes were more positive the longer they participated in the project. In various classrooms teachers were more willing to risk using novel strategies, and strikingly, they were more comfortable with methods which did not succeed. Teacher morale increased, and the interaction of elementary and secondary people was the beginning of a new communication. There was a growth of respect between these two levels of education.

Actually, the workshop format was not revolutionary. For example, Ann Zirulnik's dance/movement activities were divided into these segments:

I General overview and philosophy. This included a basic statement about movement vocabulary and its relationship to other disciplines.

II Introduction of strategies. Ms. Zirulnik used "warm-ups" for developing group trust and various approaches for implementing strategies in the classroom.

III Coffee Break. We discovered early in our presentations that this intermission in the day's activities was needed to debrief the initial impact of information. Generally, the more foreign the cognition presented, the more important the coffee break.

IV Demonstration work with students. We brought students into our workshop and Ms. Zirulnik used the strategies with them which she had explained earlier. After students felt comfortable with her direction, teachers gradually joined in the action for the balance of the morning session.

V Lunch break. Again, teachers had a chance to interact individually on a social, as well as intellectual level.

VI Questions and comments. Although Ms. Zirulnik answered questions throughout the morning, this specific period allowed teachers the opportunity to clarify major concerns and pointed the way toward the afternoon's session.

VII In-depth approaches. This was a continuation of the morning's demonstration with particular application of dance to teaching various units in different disciplines.

VIII Wrap-up and Evaluation

Workshops themselves only open doors. If they were the only activity that CATS offered its clientele, it would indeed have been a very thin program. Adjunctive to the presen-

tations were tremendous supportive services. The media centers of each of the district's nine schools contained special in-depth resources and materials for the various topics presented. Center staff delivered art supplies, newspapers, and media equipment at the convenience of the teachers. CATS director and coordinator periodically visited the various schools to reenforce concepts from the workshops and to assist teachers with implementation when they were requested to do so. And there were shoulders to cry on. How often teachers just wanted to "unload"; how often they wanted to tell about <u>their</u> problems, <u>their</u> creativity!

We listened to the teachers and we read evaluations closely. Grass root comments established the kinds of workshops we presented. We were aware of teachers' needs whether they were stated directly or implied in some oblique fashion. Sexist attitudes and Title IX demanded presentations on sexism. Units on career education evolved when the state mandated this knowledge. Teachers were exhausted but delighted with the time and products involved in their production of film strips and slide presentations. Participation in the three year workshops was an intellectual adrenalin shot. To paraphrase Rogers, "Our teachers expressed, felt, wrote, danced, moved, and created!" And they grew.

What is the CATS legacy? Here are some positive features as we perceived them:

1. Developed and sustained a climate for change which created a trusting teacher community. Established a non-threatening environment where teachers "opened-up" and were willing to risk new ideas.
2. Introduced a wide variety of arts strategies which were applicable for interdisciplinary teaching.
3. Modeled affective teacher behavior.
4. Maintained school district opportunity for cross grade level, cross discipline teacher interaction.
5. Respected teacher's professionalism in its voluntary participation and flexible programming.
6. Recognized that staff development programs are on-going and an indigenous part of a school district's curriculum.
7. Afforded university personnel the opportunity of presenting and mainstreaming current concepts to on-site teachers.

When I spoke of success earlier, in retrospect, the program's impact exceeded even the initial dream. CATS will have many lives. Its developmental years were only a beginning for offering teachers a variety of approaches for use in their classrooms. There is a warm recognition through-

out the school community that the CATS success is a model which the district will maintain in spirit, if not in fact. Presently, an Ad Hoc committee is meeting to build upon and extend the CATS concept. CIT, (Center for Inservice Training), is this projected mode which will concentrate on a major district need. Its focus will be on the improvement of language arts/communication skills through the use of arts strategies. In other words, the program will incorporate those techniques which have already proven successful. An advisory council composed of English Department chairpeople, reading consultants and representatives from elementary, middle, and secondary schools will determine sequential skills to be addressed in workshops. The novelty in this plan is not the district wide approach to problem solving, but the manner in which the program will operate. Controlled studies have indicated the positive effect of drama techniques on improving reading levels as well as composition. As I indicated earlier, other arts strategies are equally effective in the classroom. If students can acquire basic language skills through the infusion of arts and humanities techniques, and even enjoy what they are learning, perhaps we are on the threshold of opening many doors.

Someone once compared the function of the teacher to that of the magician. Extending this analogy, alternative teaching

strategies become varied insights to the grand design. When you stop to think about it, much magic does happen in the classroom. It's not the flowery brand, nor do rabbits often pop out of hats. What we do experience is the mystery of learning. By some strange sleight of hand, the veil is drawn away and light appears. Sometimes, through all our preparation, the technique just doesn't function and our world goes awry. As teachers, we try a different approach, and this time when it works, it is a matter of awe.